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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: REACTION TO ANTI-ISLAM VIDEO (C-D18-00223)

REF: SECSTATE 20818

Classified By: A/PolCouns Heather Merritt, reasons 1.4 (c & d).

11. (S) Following is Post's keyed-in responses to reftel request for Government of Nigeria (GON) preparations for, public reactions to, and related responses to the release of Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders' film, which is allegedly critical of Islam.

1A. (S//NF) IDENTIFY HOST NATION SECURITY AND INTELLIGENCE SERVICE PREPARATIONS FOR THE RELEASE OF THE FILM.

-- GON security services are aware of Dutch parliamentarian Geert Wilders' film. The State Security Service (SSS) will continue to monitor Friday sermons at locations in and around Abuja, and has alerted its field offices throughout Nigeria of the film, instructing agents to report suspicious activity to Abuja headquarters.

1B. (S//NF) DESCRIBE HOST NATION STEPS TO PREVENT VIOLENCE AND REPORT ALL VIOLENCE TARGETING WESTERNERS, SPECIFICALLY DIPLOMATIC RESIDENTS FROM THE NETHERLANDS AND US PERSONNEL.

-- No information to provide.

1C. (S//NF) IDENTIFY AND CHARACTERIZE THE NATURE OF ANY PUBLIC DEMONSTRATIONS TO TAKE PLACE.

-- No demonstrations have taken place, and the film has received scant media attention. Influential northern Nigerian newspaper, Daily Trust, reported briefly March 10 on the re-publication in February 2008 in Europe of the Danish cartoons. While this was several weeks after the cartoons had been re-printed in Denmark, it appears to have coincided with the imminent release of Wilders' film. The article, entitled "The New Face of Inter-Religious Hostility" failed to mention Wilders' film and urged fellow "brothers to continue to be tolerant and patient in the face of unprovoked insults coming from some misguided elements." Daily Trust also published, "Afghans Condemn 'Insults' to Islam," which surveyed the protest by thousands of Afghans of the re-print of the Danish cartoons and Wilders' movie, which were both judged to defame Islam.

-- Post has not heard any criticism about, much less robust interest in Wilders' film either in the Nigerian media or in

conversations with interlocutors in the Islamic community. Moreover, while the film's brevity may make it more easily accessible and downloadable, internet connectivity throughout Nigeria generally remains limited and of poor quality which may help explain the dearth of information/reaction to the film.

1D. (S//NF) IDENTIFY AND CHARACTERIZE THE ACTIONS OF ANY PERSONS WHO INTEND TO USE THE FILM'S RELEASE TO INCITE VIOLENT ACTIVITIES.

-- No information to provide.

1E. (S//NF) IDENTIFY AND CHARACTERIZE THE ACTIONS OF ANY PERSONS, SPECIFICALLY ANY RELIGIOUS LEADERS, WHO LEAD EFFORTS TO CALM PUBLIC REACTION TO THE FILM.

-- PolOff spoke with imams in Kaduna, Kano, Sokoto, and Abuja, soliciting views on Wilders' film and possible public reaction to the film's alleged defamation of Islam. While they expressed extreme displeasure for the film's content, and rebuked the Dutch government for "allowing" such a film to be produced, they appeared less than knowledgeable about or interested in the film's precise contents. At the same time, given the history of inter-religious violence in Nigeria, religious leaders as well as traditional rulers appear increasingly sensitive to anything which may spurn protests or violence between Christians and Muslims even though they remain fairly incapable, if not powerless to forestall such unrest or effectively respond to any resultant crisis. Christians have voiced concern that acts, which are perceived critical of Islam, may be exploited by Muslims to target Christians indiscriminately in spite of the fact that

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such acts occur outside Nigeria. The GON's capacity to respond to inter-religious crisis has been minimal, and has almost always involved the deployment of the military or national police force to calm tensions.

1F. (S//NF) IDENTIFY ANY HOST NATION OFFICIALS' ACTIONS TO PENALIZE DUTCH GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS OR DUTCH NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS IN REACTION TO THE FILM.

-- The Dutch government's bilateral relations with the GON remain strong, built around fairly viable, lucrative economic and energy interests. Dutch company Shell is one of a handful of international oil companies operating in Nigeria's restive Niger Delta region. Unofficial Dutch citizens, who work for international non-governmental organizations, Dutch non-governmental organizations, as missionaries, or for private foreign and Nigerian companies constitute a prominent contingent of the expatriate population in Nigeria.

-- Comment: As sub-Saharan Africa's most populous nation, with a roughly equal percentage of Christian and Muslim residents, the GON has had to ensure that it appears neutral not only in its domestic affairs, but also with foreign governments. It is unlikely that GON officials would jeopardize Nigeria's robust economic interests as well as its delicate demographic balance for an issue as potentially inflammatory and obscure as Geert Wilders' film. End Comment.

12. (SBU) COMMENT: More people were killed in the February 2006 Danish cartoon crisis in Nigeria than anywhere else in the world, and this, of course, several months after the cartoons had actually been published in Denmark. In Nigeria, religion is frequently a catalyst for inter-religious and inter-ethnic strife, and may easily be seized upon for religious-cum-political ends. END COMMENT.  
SANDERS